



Understanding Poverty
in All its Forms: A participatory
research study into poverty in the UK

This report has been produced by the **national research team**, comprised of: a **group of co-researchers**, namely Rachel Broady, Amanda Button, Sarah Campbell, Elaine Chase, Judy Corlyon, Andrea Currie, Thomas Mayes, Susan McMahon, Zewdu Mengiste, and Moraene Roberts; and an **operations team** of Corrinna Bain, Susana Castro-Mustienes, Thomas Croft, Paul Dornan, Gwennaëlle Horlait, Dann Kenningham, and Lucy Williams. We are extremely grateful for the time and active involvement of the ninety participants in this research, and for the support of organisations that helped to recruit those participants. We were backed by an international research team from the University of Oxford and the International Movement ATD Fourth World and benefited from the opportunity to engage with colleagues from across the global study about 'Determining the Dimensions of Poverty and How to Measure Them'. ATD Fourth World UK is keen to discuss with interested parties the use of the findings to inform understandings and responses to poverty.

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1. Introduction

‘Poverty kills dreams and cages the dreamers.’

— participant with a lived experience of poverty from the North of England

This report is about the experience of poverty in all its forms in the UK. Although there have been many reports about poverty, this one is different. Instead of being led by policy makers or academic experts, this research has involved those experiencing poverty throughout the process. People with experience of poverty have led, shaped and written up the research and were not simply its subjects. This report describes how the research was planned and carried out by a group of co-researchers, half of whom had direct lived experience of poverty and half of whom had experience of poverty through their work, in research, journalism or public services. The co-researchers worked with an operations team from ATD Fourth World UK, who provided a secretariat. Together the co-researchers and operations team made up the national research team.

The research involved thirteen peer groups from across the UK. Many of these groups met multiple times. The groups were each asked to discuss what poverty was in the UK. Six of these groups involved people with lived experience of poverty; six included professionals who work with those in poverty; and one group included members of the general public. All groups were of women and men of working age.¹ Each group typically involved seven people who discussed their views on the experience of poverty. They used a series of exercises devised by ATD Fourth World UK and tested and modified by the co-researchers. The groups took place in the Central Belt of Scotland, in the South of England (mostly around London) and the North of England (where groups were held in three towns and cities).

The co-researchers then worked together to make sense of these results and to create a first draft of findings. Three ‘connector’ groups of participants from the original peer groups then met to provide feedback on the first draft of findings and to discuss how these dimensions related to each other. Feedback from the connector groups was then shared with the co-researchers. This final report is the culmination of this process.

The research identified six dimensions that summarise poverty in all its forms in the UK:

- Disempowering systems, structures and policies
- Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt
- Damaged health and well-being
- Stigma, blame and judgement
- Lack of control over choices
- Unrecognised struggles, skills and contributions





**DISEMPOWERING SYSTEMS,
STRUCTURES AND POLICIES**



**FINANCIAL INSECURITY,
FINANCIAL EXCLUSION AND DEBT**



**DAMAGED HEALTH
AND WELL-BEING**



**STIGMA, BLAME AND
JUDGEMENT**



**LACK OF CONTROL
OVER CHOICES**



**UNRECOGNISED STRUGGLES,
SKILLS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

The team also identified seven key take-away messages from the research for ending poverty in the UK:

1. It is essential that people with lived experience participate in tackling poverty. This requires time, careful planning and commitment.
2. There is a need for better indicators of poverty that emphasise and capture the human experience of poverty.
3. Inadequate financial resources are a cause of poverty that take away control and shorten lives.
4. The impact of stigma and negative judgement is a particularly painful part of poverty.
5. Participants agreed services should be enabling and supportive; but some services are experienced as controlling and oppressive.
6. The skills and contributions made to society by people in poverty often go unrecognised.
7. Individual resilience is no substitute for better systems, structures and policies.

This report first sets out why this research matters. The report then discusses the findings of six dimensions identified during the research, considering which dimensions matter most, together with how these relate to each other. Details of how the research was conducted and limitations to bear in mind are provided towards the end of the report. The report concludes by developing the key take-away messages from this study for research and policy. The report is supported by online annexes which provides further details about the research.²

Box: Glossary of key terms

We use a number of key terms to explain how we did the research. Further detail is available in Section 6 and in the online annexes.

Aspects – This word describes details about poverty, such as financial insecurity or feeling judged. Each participant shared several aspects. These aspects reflect individual participants' views based on their knowledge and experience of poverty. They are the basis for much of the research analysis. The complete list of aspects is recorded in the online Annex 3.

Dimensions – This term describes the overarching themes that participants felt define poverty, such as poor health, stigmatisation, inadequate income, and so on. The dimensions were built up from the aspects and came from a collective discussion in each peer group. Peer group dimensions were then merged to produce the set of dimensions presented here by the co-researchers. The term 'dimension' is common in research; however, we found that 'headings' was more meaningful for participants.

Co-researchers – This is the group who steered the research. There were ten co-researchers, five with a lived experience of poverty and five from backgrounds including research, journalism and professional practice. The co-researchers were involved throughout the process, from planning to write up. They were supported by an operations team from ATD Fourth World UK.

Peer groups – These are groups of around six or seven participants who have in common a key characteristic, such as their knowledge of poverty through lived experience or through professional experience. In each of the three regions where research was carried out, there were two groups with lived experience, one with professional experience (such as teachers, social workers or housing providers), and one involved in policy debates about poverty (such as policy makers and academics).

Connector groups – These were a subset of peer group members in each research area who met after the merging knowledge process. They gave feedback on the draft report dimensions, discussed which dimensions were most important and how dimensions related to each other.

The Merging of Knowledge Approach – This is the process ATD Fourth World has developed to help dialogue between people living in poverty and policy makers or other decision-making groups in society. This process starts with self-reflection followed by thematic discussion in peer groups, before moving to structured dialogue between groups via discussion and debate. The principles of the Merging of Knowledge Approach were used by the co-researchers to bring together the different forms of knowledge accessed through this research.

Body maps – We used this as a tool to start conversations by asking each participant to complete a body map of 'what poverty feels like' (to the legs, heart, eyes, head, and so on). Participants then presented the body map to the group to begin to identify key aspects of poverty.

Photo voice – This discussion tool consists of placing fifty different photos on a table. The photo cards are neutral images, and so open to interpretation by participants. Photo cards were used by participants to represent and describe aspects of poverty.

2. Why this report matters

Poverty is a central problem in the UK today.³ There are many reasons to be angry: from people forced to sleep rough to an increasing need for food banks. Public spending restraint and cuts have left their mark on stressed and strained public services, resulting in too many people falling through gaps in service provision. The UK Government's flagship social security policy, the Universal Credit, aims to bring together a complex system of existing provisions; however, it has been roundly criticised for both design and implementation failures which have been shown to cause harm.⁴ Debates over Brexit, discussions of many people being somehow 'left behind', distrust of officialdom, and a feeling that too many people are not being heard — all of these have highlighted deep national divisions to which poverty and inequality are central.

The idea of poverty in all its forms is a new one in UK debates. The phrase comes from Goal 1 of the Sustainable Development Goals⁵ which is 'To end poverty in all its forms everywhere'. This goal was signed by more than 150 of the world's leaders in September 2015. Unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals, which focused on poverty in developing countries, there is a commitment to meet the Sustainable Development Goals within the UK. The term 'poverty all its forms' recognises that poverty is a multidimensional problem. So, while not having enough money is very important, it is important to understand that there are also other dimensions to poverty such as ill-health or barriers to education. Our process was to use the knowledge and expertise of those living in poverty and those working with people affected by poverty to answer the question. That process gives weight to our findings which aim to describe poverty in all its forms in the UK.

The UK Government lacks an official poverty measurement, meaning there is no agreed yardstick by which to understand policy success or failure. There are different approaches to understanding poverty which are produced by central and devolved Government and by independent organisations; these reflect how poverty is often seen in public debates. These include the official Households Below Average Income series, which provides official low income measures and is published annually⁶, the independent Minimum Income Standards⁷ and the independent Social Metrics Commission⁸. The Department for Work and Pensions recently agreed to publish experimental statistics on the Social Metrics Commission's proposed indicators of poverty which could become part of a future measurement.⁹ The UK's Office of National Statistics (ONS) has the responsibility to track progress against the Sustainable Development Goals¹⁰ and is developing a reporting platform with a focus on indicators based on income rather than wider indicators. These approaches use income as the key indicator of poverty. Our approach adds depth by considering poverty in all its forms.

We are not alone in including the voice of people with direct experience of poverty in our work. The Minimum Income Standards approach is supported by focus groups of people from a mix of backgrounds including people experiencing poverty. The Social Metrics Commission also recognises the importance of lived experience, although their approaches have been developed by policy experts. However, this report matters because we go further by involving those affected by poverty in designing how the problem was to be studied. The starting point was to put the voices of people with direct experience of poverty at the front of efforts to understand the problem. There is growing recognition of the need to include the insights of service users when designing public services. There is also growing recognition of this imperative in research; but this remains rare in research on poverty. People who live in poverty have been excluded from the debate by power structures that privilege certain sorts of expertise and exclude non-technical ways of understanding problems.¹¹ The voices of people with direct experience of life in poverty must be heard for two reasons. It is ethical to hear from those most affected. Moreover, failing to listen to these voices means missing vital information and dialogue that could make social policy work better for everyone. Our findings should be taken seriously precisely because of how they were produced.

3. The dimensions of poverty in the UK

The results of the process described in earlier sections were six dimensions of poverty. Each dimension is named and described here with reference to the aspects which were the building blocks of these dimensions. The intention is that the dimensions add detail to our understanding of what makes up poverty in all its forms. Drawing divisions between dimensions was difficult given how interlinked they are in the experience of poverty; however, we aimed to identify dimensions which are conceptually distinct from one another.

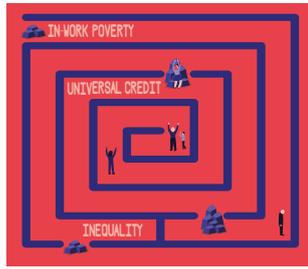
Each aspect is a quotation from one of the research participants. We have included the complete list of aspects in the online Annex 3 to this report. We have placed weight on collected aspects generated and have tried to avoid over-interpreting individual aspects which reflect one person's response to the peer group exercises. The dimension descriptions are of different lengths, partly reflecting the volume of feedback about underlying aspects. However, as the ranking exercise presented in the following section shows, a smaller number of aspects for a particular theme did not necessarily mean it was thought of as less important.

The following text describes each dimension in turn. Through the merging knowledge process, our aim was to identify dimensions which were conceptually separate. Inevitably, we found real life to be messy; there are clear relationships between the content in different dimensions. These interrelationships are discussed further in a later section. Quotations, in bold below, are either from the aspects, stated by individual participants (and listed in Annex 3), or from dimension headings and statement (these are not listed in Annex 3). This heading and statement information was agreed on by the peer groups. It is quoted to add further explanation and described as coming from the group that agreed to cite it. Where rounded brackets are used in the text following, the bracketed words were used in the original peer group reports. Squared brackets identify explanation added during the writing stage. To avoid weighing down the text, we have not given the quotations' origin here, but this can be seen in Annex 3.

The research **identified six dimensions** that describe poverty in all its forms in the UK:

DISEMPOWERING SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND POLICIES

Economic, political and social structures can cause poverty. Policy is operated in a way that disempowers. Systems designed to support people are not working in ways that people want. Systemic cuts in funds for needed services have exacerbated inequality.



STIGMA, BLAME AND JUDGEMENT

Misrepresentation about poverty in the UK and a lack of understanding lead to negative judgement, stigma and blame, which are deeply destructive to individuals and families. Prejudice and discrimination result in people in poverty feeling they are treated like lesser human beings.



FINANCIAL INSECURITY, FINANCIAL EXCLUSION AND DEBT

Financial insecurity means not being able to satisfy your basic needs. Worrying about money every day causes huge stress and misery.



LACK OF CONTROL OVER CHOICES

Poverty means a lack of control over choices and opportunities. Over time this can lead to increased social isolation and risk, as well as restricting people’s social, educational and cultural potential. The lack of good options reduces people’s control over their lives and traps people in repetitive cycles of hardship, disappointment and powerlessness. Lack of opportunity and choice increases risk and restricts options. Poverty is dehumanising.



DAMAGED HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

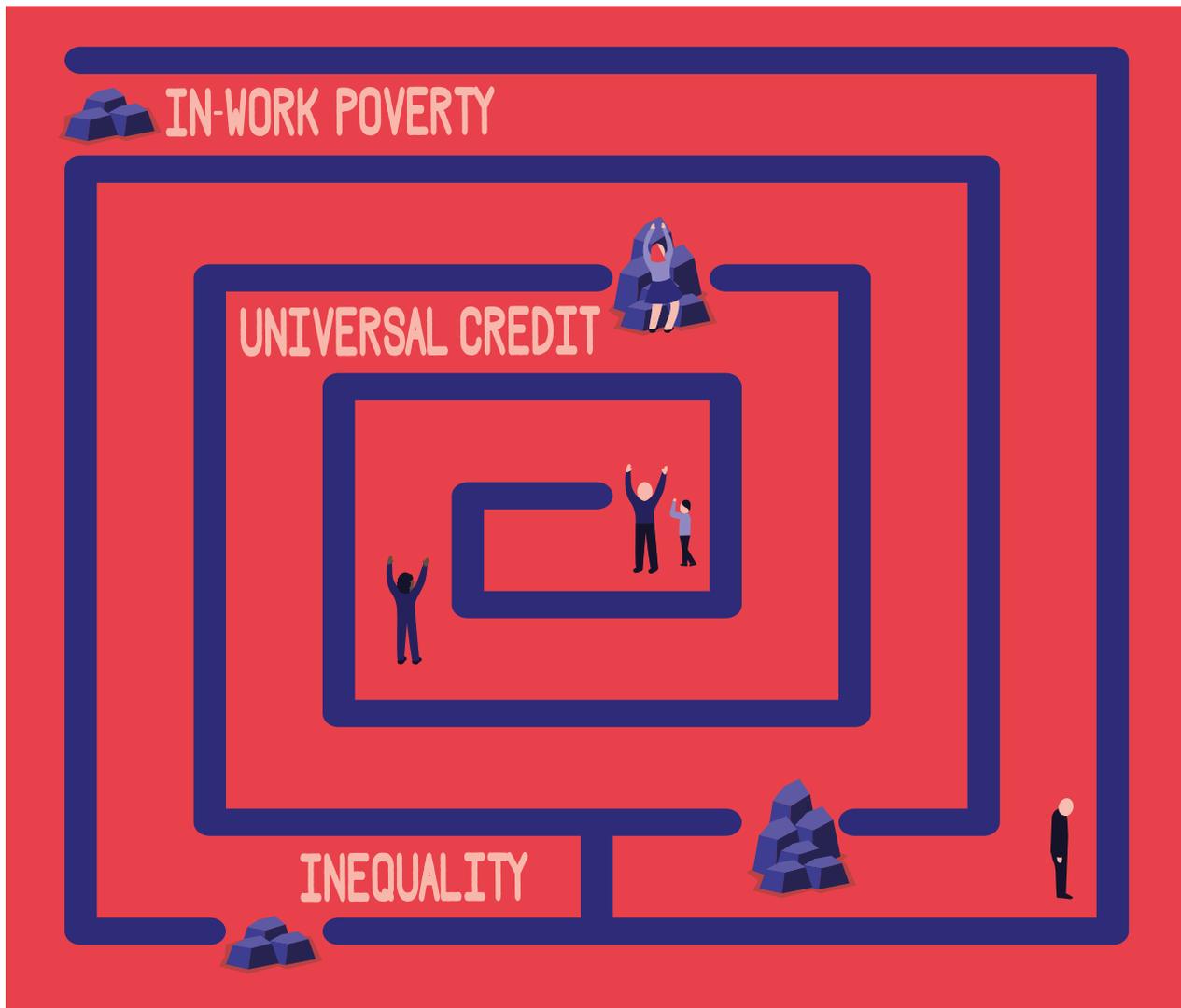
Poverty is bad for health and can shorten life. It has a negative impact on physical, emotional, mental and social well-being.



UNRECOGNISED STRUGGLES, SKILLS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The wealth of experience and life skills people in poverty possess is not recognised enough. Too often, public discourse undervalues the contribution that people in poverty make to society and to their communities while facing the daily impact of poverty.





DISEMPOWERING SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND POLICIES

‘Poverty means being part of a system that leaves you waiting indefinitely in a state of fear and uncertainty.’

- a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

Many of the aspects identified by participants were grouped under this heading. ‘The system’ or sometimes ‘government’ were commonly used as broad terms to describe the ways in which society operates (or services are provided). This dimension covers both how individuals are treated and the consequences of this treatment for individuals and society.

Anger and frustration with the system and in particular, policies and structures, featured frequently in group discussions. When group participants were asked to rank the six dimensions according to which should be tackled first to improve the lives of people with experience of poverty, the one most frequently

mentioned was this dimension covering systems, structures and policies. The overall view was that those in positions of power make decisions with little regard for the people affected by them. Poverty has increased through indifference by policy makers to the suffering it inflicts on individuals but also through a set of deliberate policies affecting the most vulnerable people. For one group of professionals and practitioners, poverty was seen as *'structural power over people'*, a *'system defined by power over the people'* and *'a form of exploitation, [...] not a natural disaster'*. Other group participants pointed out that *'systems designed to create wealth also create poverty'* and that since our currently high rate of poverty is *'man-made and man-managed'* it is *'not inevitable'* and *'could be sorted, but we choose not to.'*

The fact that poverty is not being solved was thought to be due to other political priorities. These included *'privileging war over people in poverty'* or because *'destitution is the system's weapon of choice'*. *'Things are done to us on purpose, at family and community level, to suit the rich not the poor'*. A slightly less harsh, but nevertheless damning view was that *'politicians are so out of touch, sitting in an office making decisions about communities they don't know anything about'* or that people were *'making decisions that won't affect them, who care more about numbers and not the people'*. Furthermore, *'barriers [were] put in place that stop people progressing out of poverty, for example, social and economic policies are trapping people in poverty'*, denying access *'to benefits, to work, health, housing, food'*. Bureaucracy and accessibility of services is a problem because, as one group concluded, *'access paths are unclear and access is not straight forward'* in the case of services which were meant to help people. The result is a *'nineteenth century system that does not fit twenty-first century needs'* and the *'individualisation of a systemic problem'*. One group of practitioners noted that the *'economy has advanced but communities [are] left behind'*. One group of people with a lived experience of poverty expressed the view that it is not the welfare system itself that is at fault but rather that the *'impact of austerity has destroyed a system designed to be supportive'*.

A particular dislike was for the dehumanisation caused by the way services are offered: *'in the system you are a number instead of a person'*. A group of people with lived experience of poverty argued that practitioners should *'look at the policies and procedures and have a person-centred approach'* and that *'some services don't look at what that person needs. Some services are just there to tick boxes'*. Reference was made to the double humiliation of needing to use food banks and being answerable to staff for choices made: *'The government [...] degrades people by judging them and making them think they can't support their families.'* *'Food banks ask what you have spent your money on.'* Even worse could be *'not fitting in with services' ground-rules leading to exclusions'* or the inability to engage with services because providers are influenced by *'negative past history'*.

The consequence for society and individuals of the impact of policies was frequently discussed in the peer groups. Participants in the groups shared what they saw as the overwhelmingly negative impact of these policies and procedures on society, communities and individuals. The overall view was that the resulting level of poverty and deliberate and blatant inequality has led to the routine humiliation of individuals.

Criticism of some social work practices and practitioners is also noted in the section on stigma, blame and judgement. However, some people in the groups felt that the blame for their situation might well be laid at the door of the Government department responsible. One view was that *'the government needs to give more money so social workers get more appropriate training'*. Some participants recognised the constraints placed on services and service providers as a result of the system in which they are working, adding that *'services have not got the funding they need'*. Another view was that workers are not at fault for decisions which are imposed upon them from above. One group of people with a lived experience of poverty concluded: *'Some social workers are very quick to break families up. Some social workers want to keep families together but they get overruled by managers. It is about the Department and not the workers.'* However, the predominant feeling was that those on the ground who are tasked with administering the Government's social and welfare policies should display a more understanding and humane approach towards those directly affected by the unwelcome policies. *'Poverty becomes invisible in social care practice'* perhaps because it 'is not seen as core business' by services required to focus on consequences not causes.

The evidence of what had happened as a result of the systems in operation was visible in the community by *'homeless people roaming the streets and having to carry everything'* and *'the rise of food banks in churches'*. The existence of such *'real problems in our communities'* was felt to *'undermine our capacity to campaign against real issues'*. Those who were experiencing the resulting disadvantage were left powerless because *'all tools we had to fight back have been stripped away in the name of austerity'*. *'We have things done to us — [we're] crushed, manipulated, divided, gagged to prevent a social movement to effect change.'* *'The system took our dignity and pride away, like the miners (they lost the fight and then were given hand-outs)'*. Possibly the greatest of these issues was inequality arising from the system and how it is operated: *'the difference between the haves and the have nots'*. Poverty is *'exacerbated by consumerism'* and *'amplified when wealth and poverty are side by side'*. Poverty was considered a *'human rights issue'* as it *'impacts on the right to family life'*.

The manner in which those living in poverty were being diminished, disregarded or even exploited by the better off sections of society was evidenced not only by the normalisation of food banks which *'makes the middle class feel better'* but also in the way the latter were seen to be *'feeding off working-class initiatives. e.g. football'*. Additionally, particular attention and care was seen as needed for the *'vested interests'* of the *'poverty industry'*. Some participants used this term to refer to exploitative commercial practices, while others used it to speak about the anti-poverty non-profit sector. Participants in one group of opinion formers noted their *'knowledge that other people may benefit from your poverty'* and that the poverty industry needs to be staffed by people who are *'self-reflexive'*. A further view was that the anti-poverty sector *'should not be viewed as the problem; rather it needs a strong positive identity that promotes its contribution to solving the problem'*. The group concluded on the need *'to ensure [the poverty industry is] never self-serving'*.

At an individual level, poverty was seen to combine with other forms of discrimination such as sexism, racism, or homophobia, affecting every aspect of one's life. Group participants considered that *'poverty doesn't see value in us — it stifles our growth as people'*. They were *'disenfranchised (...because of) being poor'*, *'neglected and failed by services'*, and *'treated like cattle — you have no dignity and no identity'*.

Notably, there is *'stereotyping [because] the government thinks that you can't budget your money to look after your family'* without recognising the impact of government policies on people's ability to do so. Taking universal credit, for example, there are *'long gaps between payments of benefits'* and a *'long initial wait (six weeks) with universal credit'* which perversely serves to justify the government's belief in an inability to budget. The reality is that *'people may lose their homes if they have to wait for the first payment of universal credit or cannot keep up with their payments.'* This makes people feel that they are *'part of a system that leaves you waiting indefinitely in a state of fear and uncertainty'*.

Several groups highlighted being particularly adversely affected by what is seen as a draconian system. One group of professionals and practitioners concluded that *'poverty has a negative impact on children and families, exhausted and overtired parents. Poverty takes time and focus away from family life.'* Parents are *'relying on food banks to feed their family'*. This includes many people in work and on low incomes as well as those who *'don't have the right to work'*, for instance asylum seekers. Disempowering structures were said to have greatest impact on women including *'mothers (predominantly) as sole providers when children have so many needs as well as self'*. Women feel that for economic, cultural, social or policy reasons they have *'no choice and no control of their own fertility'*. For example, *'the child tax credit two-child policy encroaches on your human rights, moral and religious beliefs as parents because the government is dictating how many children they will support (maximum two children) so if you have any more you are on your own'*. More generally, many women were said to *'experience period poverty'*.

Young people were considered to be *'treated differently because of their class'*. Asylum seekers appeared to be singled out for particularly harsh treatment: *'as an asylum seeker, poverty is a punishment — you cannot have cash, it restricts choice'* and *'the asylum system grossly limits the ways in which you can contribute to society (you have no right to work)'*. For others who also had lived experience of poverty, the result was that *'our culture is being taken away from us — cooking, talking, simple things, which are not valued'* and, not only for them but for others too, *'poverty means not being welcome in your community and being deliberately priced out.'* The result of facing so many difficulties and so much hardship was a *'lack of expectation and encouragement'* and the feeling that poverty is *'like a tangled web that you can never escape'*.



FINANCIAL INSECURITY, FINANCIAL EXCLUSION AND DEBT

‘Poverty is worrying about money all of the time.’

- a participant from a professional/practitioner group from the South East of England

There was consensus across the groups that money and its absence are a key part of what poverty is and that this is one of the dimensions of poverty. Some participants identified a number of the reasons that people did not have money. Commonly understood reasons included *‘struggling to survive on benefits’* or *‘in-work poverty’* on very low wages. One participant also drew attention to *‘restricted access to forms of capital’*, suggesting that people in poverty have both fewer resources and fewer options over money management.

Peer groups described the implications of not having enough money or of being financially insecure. Participants spoke of the need for *'financial security and the pursuit of happiness'*, with others noting the sharp and stressful realities that *'if you are starving it is difficult to think about anything else'* and that *'poverty is worrying about money all of the time'*. There was a recognition that the stress caused by poverty might affect how decisions are taken. One group concluded that *'financial pressure leads to huge stress [and] can have consequences linked to (lack of) opportunities and bad decisions.'* Such decisions might include being led into debt because of general pressure. Participants were keen to draw attention to the stressful context in which decisions are taken, rather than simply to blame people for bad choices.

Members of the peer groups reflected upon the impact of not having enough money to meet basic needs, with supporting children and family being a very important theme: *'providing for a baby or a child can be hard because they grow so fast'* and *'there's a lot of things going on in school that you can't afford which catch you unawares'*. It was also clear that poverty means hard choices that go beyond limiting people's access to *'goods and services'*. For example: *'you have to rob Peter to pay Paul'*; *'[you] can't afford to pay your bills'*. Poverty could seriously limit people's ability to do things most would regard as essential, such as *'not being able to see family because of money'*.

As well as being concerned about not being able to meet basic needs, many participants reflected on how poverty prevents people from taking a full part in the economic and consumer life around them. For some, it means *'just having the minimal and the daily basics, not luxuries'*. For others, *'poverty feels like you are on the outside looking in — you cannot afford to take part'*. There were specific examples which often related to not being able to take part in social or leisure activities: *'not enough money to see live football'*, *'not being able to go on holiday'* or *'go into posh restaurants and eat nice food'*. There was also an important sense of how people felt about being excluded from what society had to offer: *'Looking at others buying extravagant things, we want the same things. Our self-esteem and pride gets hurt'*.



DAMAGED HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

‘Poverty is not being able to smell the flowers because the stress of life gets in the way.’

- a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

This dimension includes aspects of poverty that have a profound impact on the well-being of people experiencing it. It was striking how inter-connected the health and well-being dimension was with all the other dimensions of poverty identified, indicating how the dimensions are not experienced in isolation but very much in combination. There were a number of themes emerging from the analysis which related to the physical, mental emotional and social dimensions of well-being.

At the physical level, peer groups associated poverty with the likelihood of a shorter life, illustrated by quotes such as: *‘if you live in a deprived area, life expectancy drops dramatically’*; *‘poverty is like being on the brink of death’*; and *‘poverty shortens lives (including poor quality housing, poor diet and exploitation)’*.

Closely linked to the idea that poverty shortens lives is the theme relating to the impact of poverty on poor physical health and a constant struggle to survive. One participant suggested *'everyone should have access to healthy fresh food'*; another that people were *'not having the time and money to prepare good food'*. These factors were said to *'reduce people's ability to make healthy choices such as buying or growing fresh fruit and veg'* which leads to *'poor health and a lack of energy which in turn reinforces poverty'*. Poor physical health also results from *'homelessness'*, *'lack of money'*, and other physical effects of poverty. The effects of stresses resulting from the daily challenges of *'not being able to feed your children'*, *'multiple traumas'*, *'caring responsibilities'*, and the constant inability to *'keep your head above water'* were also burdens. At times the struggle to survive could lead to *'criminalisation — if you don't have food you are going to nick it'* or *'being forced into prostitution because of lack of food'*.

At the emotional level, at least four important themes were identified, which relate also to the dimension about negative judgement, stigma and blame. Firstly, poverty has a negative impact on mental health, demonstrated through statements such as, *'poverty plays with your emotions'*, *'greyness, [you] need a reason to get out of bed'*, and *'looking for an escape from overwhelming problems'*, and *'depression'* and feeling *'suicidal'*. Secondly in a particularly prominent theme, poverty makes people feel inadequate and generates negative emotions such as shame, embarrassment, guilt and anger. There were many aspects illustrating this theme including: *'embarrassment and feeling a failure'*; *'low self-esteem'*; *'fear, guilt, remorse, shame, embarrassed at accessing services'*; not being able to *'access personal care and health and well-being services [because you] feel worthless and embarrassed'*; *'poverty is feeling guilty for what you do not have and you cannot give'*; and at the same time, *'guilt about having anything nice'*; or *'feeling embarrassed about using food banks'*. Poverty also meant *'feeling angry that people do not care or understand'*, feeling *'stress, frustration with self, others and the system'*, and *'perceiving self not to be worthy'*.

Poverty makes people fearful and creates a sense of total insecurity, a theme that was powerfully captured through statements defining poverty as: *'feeling defeated, hopeless and like a burden'*; *'dealing with the erosion of the safety net'*; *'fear rules your life and you're frightened'*; *'fear that there is not enough money or whatever resources are needed'*; *'fear of violence'*; not being able to *'talk candidly because of being afraid of getting into trouble with authorities'*; *'lack of stability, being unable to escape a sense of vulnerability'*; *'one feels ensnared and fearful that one may be preyed upon'*, and life becomes *'a treadmill of crisis, no calm'*. People were said to feel *'overloaded with problems'*; and forced to *'accept that you have to be cared for by others'*, which creates a sense of vulnerability.

Poverty has a negative impact on self and identity through people feeling not recognised as human beings and stigmatised and judged because of their circumstances. Peer groups captured these feelings through statements such as *'poverty is the degradation of people'*; *'poverty means you feel invisible, like a ghost'*, it *'defines you and reduces your ability to enhance and grow'*, it ends in *'loss of hope'* and *'your identity lost'*. Such feelings were said to lead people to constantly *'look for a place away from judgement'* and *'not to feel they are the lowest of the low'*. For one participant, the effect of poverty (and the *'system'*, including benefits assessment and sanctions) was an *'infringement of freedom of speech'* for people in poverty and *'a lack of capacity for advocacy'*, particularly for *'health needs and for health needs to be taken seriously'*.

Peer groups also identified important social impacts of poverty which often exacerbated the mental and emotional impacts identified above. That poverty means feeling lonely and disconnected was an important theme, illustrated by statements including *'poverty makes you feel alone, it comes from inside'*; people feel *'marginalised'*; poverty is *'isolation, withdrawn from peers/social networks'*; *'realising that you are on your own and only relying on yourself'*; *'being lost in the fog, not knowing if you are disconnected or cast adrift'*. Moreover, poverty was said to exclude and to pit people against one another, indicated by statements such as *'poverty divides us'*; *'poverty means loss of community spirit'*; *'poverty limits your opportunities to engage with others around you'*; and *'poverty excludes people from many cultural activities, which adds to a sense of exclusion and isolation'*.

A further theme was that poverty can limit joy, dreams and aspirations. Here we stress that this is as a result of poverty. We are not suggesting any intrinsic lack of aspirations among people living in poverty; but rather that poverty has a corrosive effect on people's sense of control over their lives. This theme was captured by one group as a statement that *'poverty means you are not allowed to be happy'*. Participants also noted that poverty means you are *'not able to smell the flowers because the stress of life gets in the way'*. Poverty can make people *'afraid to dream'*. Poverty *'kills dreams and cages the dreamers'*. The final theme was that the oppression of poverty can make people become conditioned and constrained by their circumstances. This was discussed in terms of: *'conditioning them to accept their situation'*; people not knowing they are oppressed; feeling that the *'abnormal becomes normal (e.g. sleeping under bridges)'*; and that *'perceptions of real life are warped'* through their experience of poverty.



STIGMA, BLAME AND JUDGEMENT

‘Being in poverty makes you feel ashamed.’

– a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

It became apparent that many participants feel bombarded with negative messages. Widespread misunderstanding about poverty and the stereotyping of people in poverty lead to stigmatisation. This dimension illustrates the psychologically destructive effect that stigma has on individuals, families and communities.

The peer groups described how people living in poverty feel that they are often judged unfairly and that *‘people in poverty are not only isolated but used as a warning’*. They observed that *‘poverty means that we are forgotten’*, that *‘perception of poverty is distorted’* and that *‘poverty means you will be scorned.’* People in poverty are felt to be *‘judged on lifestyle choices’* and *‘judged for things that are not your fault.’* The result of these judgements and the barriers put in the way of participation was that *‘poverty means you are only allowed to observe, you cannot take part.’*

Participants observed how unfavourable comparisons can lead to negative stereotyping, such as *'children from low-income communities are not deemed as cultured as middle-class children'*. It was noted by some that living in poverty could be made increasingly difficult because, on the one hand *'assumptions are made that people in poverty can't succeed and don't have aspirations and hopes and dreams'*, whilst on the other hand their attempts to live up to *'unachievable aspirations exacerbated by the media often leading to a sense of failure'*.

As well as suffering the negative judgement of others, some peer groups also described how these judgements can become internalized. We heard that *'being in poverty makes you feel ashamed'*; you are *'made to feel worthless because people are judged by their bank balances'*; and *'poverty is feeling that you are a burden, that you do not contribute to the economy and society'*. People in poverty are *'conditioned to suffer in silence and not ask for help — to just get up, shut up, and get on with it until you take a decision to break the cycle'*. As one group pointed out, *'you look and feel different to everybody else and you don't want anybody to know'*. Another participant powerfully described *'shutting the door on life'* due to such feelings.

The peer groups who participated in the research reported that the experience of living in poverty could only be described and understood by listening to 'complex and individual stories' that *'poverty is not always obvious; appearances can be deceptive'*. As poverty exists in so many different forms, to solve it *'views should not be restricted; we need to stay open-minded and keep learning in order to understand adequately'*. The peer groups described *'being judged without knowing your story (without walking in my shoes)'*.

One of the effects of this stereotyping of people living in poverty is that people could feel unseen and unheard by those in power, which was described by one participant as *'disenfranchisement by distance from elite powers: decision makers, politicians, councillors, service providers'*. There is a tendency to blame people in poverty saying *'you don't need to be [poor]'*. Others said that *'poverty means being subject to scrutiny'* and that *'poverty means being bulldozed, being bullied, pushed away, and not wanted.'*

The peer groups reported that stigma and negative judgment surrounding people in poverty are part of the ways in which potential is lost. Poverty limits *'the fulfilling of potential - by (i) perceiving self not to be worthy (ii) having others telling them they are not worthy or (iii) by circumstances'*. Feeling discriminated against by Social Services is a matter of particular concern for some. One group of participants with a lived experience of poverty in particular experiences *'Social Services constantly looking over your shoulder especially when you have been in care yourself'*, *'Social Services taking young children away instead of helping them at home'*, *'Social Services blocking the return of a child to their parents'*. Some parents believe that this results in *'children being wrongly adopted'*.



LACK OF CONTROL OVER CHOICES

‘Poverty means your horizons being hugely restricted because your focus is on survival.’

– a participant with an opinion former/decision maker background from the Central Belt of Scotland

Many participants identified the ways in which poverty undermines the choices people can make. The consequence of limited choices and bad options is to reduce hopes and trap people in poverty. A number of clusters of aspects were identified.

The first grouping of aspects relates to the impact that poverty, and particularly not having enough money, has for choices. Participants spoke of *‘choosing between food and fun’* and of the consequences of a lack of money: *‘you are excluded from things because financially you can’t do it (family gatherings, birthdays, special occasions etc.)’*. Participants also spoke of the impact of not being able to take a full part. As one participant suggested *‘horizons [are] being hugely*

restricted because your focus is on survival'. A number of participants contrasted the aspirations that people have across society with what is realistic for those in poverty. As one participant put it, there is *'an aspiration to get to something you will never get to'* and as one group agreed *'poverty limits aspirations and dreams'*. While the limits that poverty creates are real enough, poverty might also affect people's readiness and confidence to seek opportunities. One group concluded that it is not just a *'lack of opportunities'* but *'self-censorship'* that creates a *'perceived lack of opportunity'*.

A second cluster touched on how poverty is a web, wherein disadvantages are seen to combine and compound to trap people over time and even over generations. As one participant put it, *'poverty is a vicious circle: difficult to break the cycle'*. Another said: *'poverty is a generational spider's web almost impossible to get out [of].'* And as a third put it, there is a *'time warp — timing is never right. Every day seems the same, like "Groundhog Day", same challenges and the same struggles'*. Choice and control also came across within this cluster. Participants believe that those in poverty have *'choices but these are constrained by life circumstances'*. As one group concluded, that means they are *'not in charge of our own destiny: lack of understanding by others leading to lack of control'*. Having *'too much time on your hands'* because you are cut off from economic and social life feels to one group like being jailed in a *'dungeon of boredom — staring at same four walls. Chained up [in a] place where nothing happens'*. There is also a sense therefore that barriers are created, that people are *'restricted and controlled; things put in the way of opportunities'* and *'restricted by judgement'*. A number of participants spoke of the ways in which the realities of poverty contrast with what is hoped or expected from life, with people *'living beyond your means'*. One participant said that a consequence is that *'poverty is dehumanising'*.

Participants also talked about the tangible impact that restricted choices has on education and access to culture in particular. These make up a third cluster. This is important because *'poor education outcomes lead to fewer job opportunities and more poverty'*. Money is important here, but so too is exclusion: *'poverty is not just about money: there is poverty of education and exclusion from special things'*. Others commented on how such exclusion might mean that *'poverty leads to poorer outcomes in school (maybe because of low self-esteem and/or inability of parents to provide support)'*. For another participant, poverty is seen to result in a *'lack of resources leading to a lack of opportunity: sports clubs, private tuition, kit, cultural things, music, museum'*. A third participant emphasised the impact of the *'school environment [which] can create barriers for children living in poverty. (Parents have to work — can't come to parent's evening. Non-school uniform days can highlight children living in poverty)'*.



UNRECOGNISED STRUGGLES, SKILLS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

‘Poverty means having to break down barriers.’

– a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England

This dimension describes how people living in poverty find ways to survive the challenges of day to day life. The actions people take in responding to poverty can, and often do, go further than simply alleviating the daily emotional and physical trauma of poverty. The key point is that the skills and capacities of people in poverty are very often undervalued or unrecognised. However, the fact that people develop skills in the face of adversity does not make poverty any the less unacceptable.

Several peer groups highlighted that people have different ways to cope with the impact of poverty and to find the strength to go on. One group expressed this as *‘getting through: overcoming a multitude of hurdles, finding coping mechanisms and survival reactions’*. Some examples of coping mechanisms noted include: *‘pets*

help with depression and bad times, and *'my boys help me keep going and give me a reason to get up in the morning'*. One peer group participant pointed to the fact that the ways people deal with what they are facing are not always positive, with the statement *'coping mechanisms — drink'*.

One peer group participant referred to a *'need to be resourceful'*. The necessity for people living in poverty to adapt to their lack of finances was emphasised. *'People on [a] low budget have to budget and have to look after every penny and it's a life skill'. 'You've got to be creative with what you cook. You've got to use your imagination when you cook for a large family'*. But whilst there was agreement on this, one of the groups of participants with a lived experience of poverty concluded *'families in poverty aren't recognised for the wealth of life skills they have.'*

Some participants highlighted that the struggle they have endured gave them important perspectives and a strong motivation to contribute to change. It was acknowledged how poverty can be a *'hard way of life; but it is a strength for learning to deal with things and turn out the person I am today.'* Another peer group member shared how they and others from their community were *'trying to break down walls and barriers with the stigma associated with poverty.'*

Although life in poverty is precarious economically and socially, this dimension shows that people in poverty are often searching for ways to resist that go beyond the struggle to meet their basic needs. People look for meaningful ways to show solidarity and help those around them. For some, this means working with *'charities and community groups'*; for others it means membership in faith groups. Participants recognised that there is a *'need for nourishment; not just food, [but] faith and education'* and, as one group concluded, *'hope and faith: resilience sparked by experience'*.

Despite the harmful effects of poverty, or perhaps because of this, people can have a strong desire to participate in the effort to overcome poverty in their communities and in wider society. As one peer group participant shared, people living in poverty might sometimes be *'broken [by their experience], but [they are] generous in spirit, solidarity and community spirit'*.

4. The most important dimensions

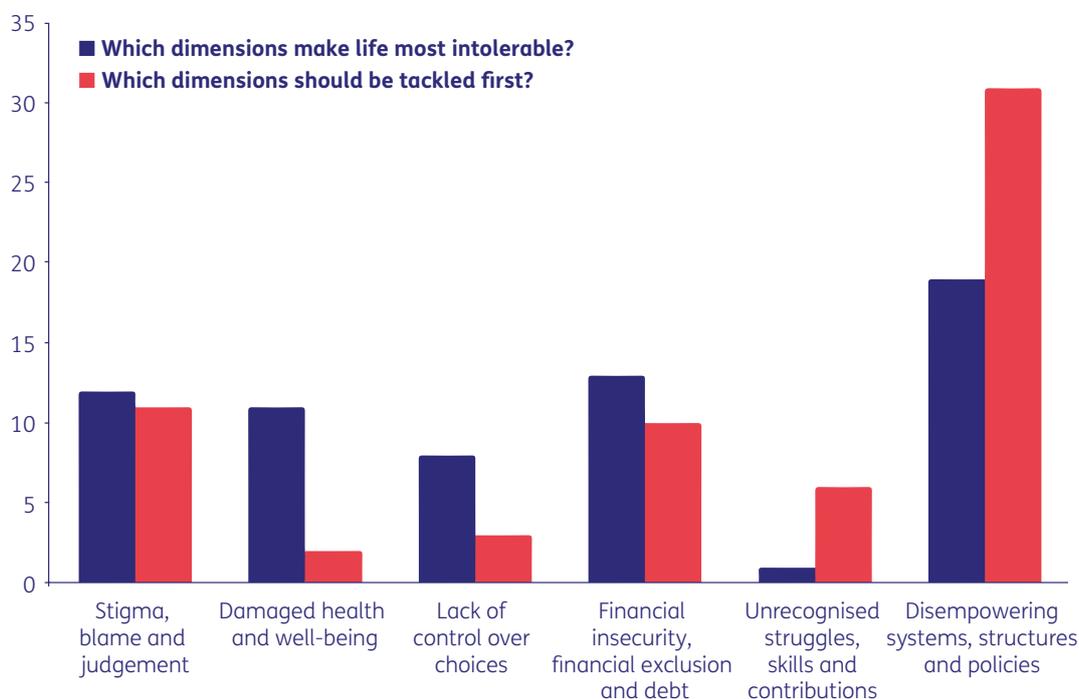
The findings in this section draw upon meetings of the connectors who were asked to reflect on the first draft of the dimensions. There are some differences between the first draft names of dimensions used in the chart, which were those discussed with the connector groups, and the final dimension names used elsewhere in this report. These differences are noted in Figure 1 below. Three connectors groups were held in Autumn 2018, one in each of the regional locations where research was carried out. During these sessions the participants were asked two questions to rank the importance of the dimensions. Following discussing, each person was given three coloured dots to show their response through ‘votes’ for each dimension.

The two questions addressed to each peer group and the three connector groups were:

- Which dimension makes life most intolerable?
- Which dimension should be tackled first?

These two questions are framed differently: the first aims to understand perceptions of what matters most for a person’s well-being; the second seeks to learn which is the most important for policy to address. This chart includes the total number of votes for each dimension and question. Since there are a small number of participants (21 in total¹²) and the participants self-selected to join the connector groups, the chart should be treated with caution as it could be swayed by the views of a small number of participants. For the same reason, we have combined the totals across the groups. Given this caution, the co-researchers discussed these rankings as food for thought, rather than a definitive conclusion.

Figure 1: Ranking the dimensions (total votes of the connector groups)



On the first question, about what made life most intolerable, the most highly ranked dimension was 'Systems, structures and policies'. This covers Government intervention but also wider inequities in the organisation of society (such as unemployment and harsh employment conditions, including zero-hours contracts). This finding suggested that while Government policies were often set up to help (and with a desire that they should do so), the reality in some policy areas (social security and social work particularly) is that they often feel oppressive to people in poverty. The dimensions about finances, stigma and blame, and health and well-being were also considered matters that make life most intolerable. The coping mechanism dimension (equivalent to the dimension 'Unrecognised struggles, skills and contributions') was given the lowest importance as something that makes life intolerable. This dimension emphasizes many of the efforts that people in poverty make to manage and so it is perhaps unsurprising that it ranked low on this question.

The second question, about what should be tackled first, directed attention towards interventions; so it is not surprising that the dimension about systems was ranked most highly here by a large margin. High rankings also went to finances and 'Stigma, negative judgement and blame'. The explanations for the ranking of these dimensions lay in the causal importance that most participants gave to adequate income and the concerns raised about stigmatising experiences (such as in the media, or in the delivery of policy). It is notable that dimensions such as health and lack of control were given quite a low priority on this question, which reflected a sense that, in large part, poor health or a lack of control are consequences of the stigma and inadequate income experienced through poverty.

5. The relationships between dimensions

As with the ranking of the dimensions, the relationships between the dimensions were discussed at a number of points during the research. Since the merging knowledge process substantially changed the dimensions, the discussion noted here occurred within the group of co-researchers, reflecting on the results of the three connector meetings. The co-researchers considered points made during these connector groups and also brought their own knowledge of the wider research. The aim was to understand participants' views about how the dimensions interconnected with one another.

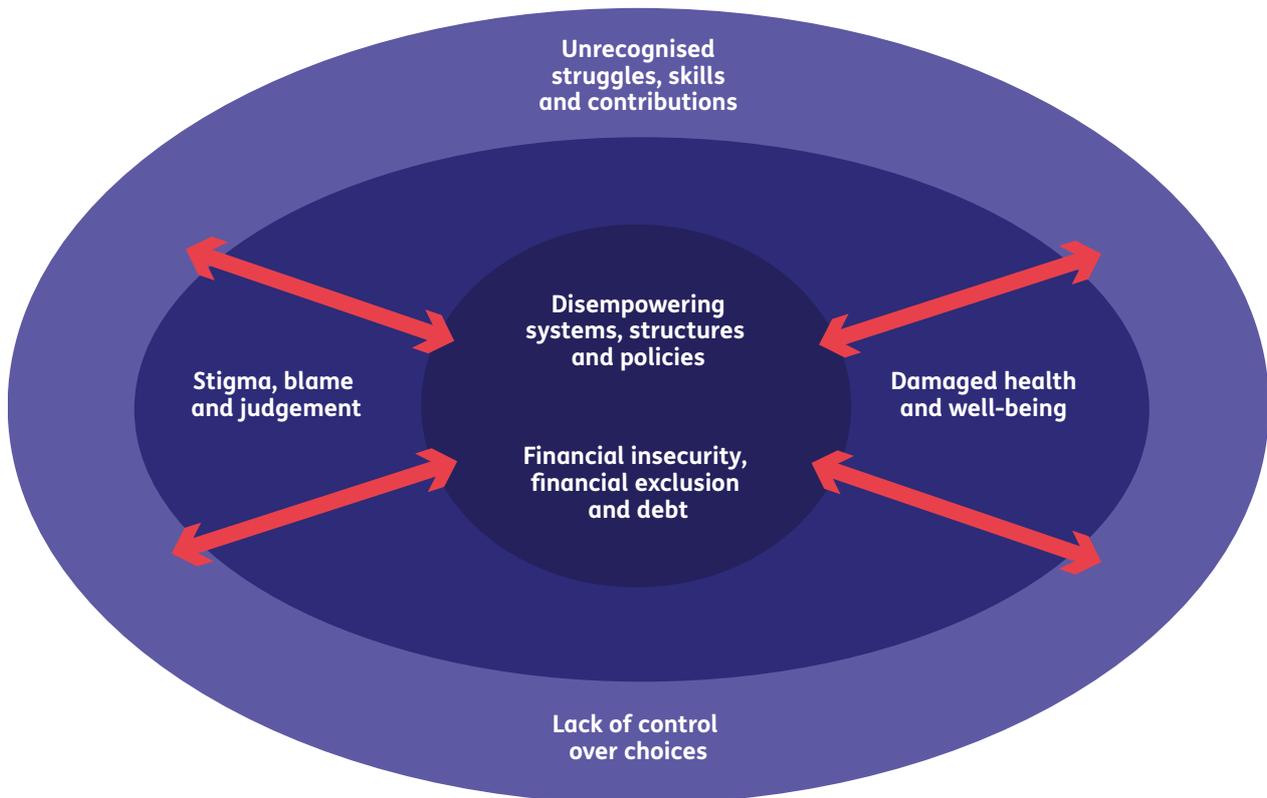
In the connector meeting discussions, the relationships exercise involved free discussion prompting participants to identify links among dimensions. At this point, dimensions had been written onto cards that could be moved around and connected using arrows. This exercise followed the ranking discussion, and often related to it.

A number of models were proposed and discussed for how the dimensions could fit together. Our initial model described causes and consequences by which 'Disempowering systems, structures and policies' lead to 'Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt' and then to 'Lack of control over choices'. 'Stigma, blame and judgement' followed and result in 'Damaged health and well-being'. Within this model, there was also a feedback loop whereby 'Damaged health and well-being' increases the vulnerability of individuals to negative impacts leading from 'Disempowering systems, structures and policies'.

Subsequent discussion challenged this linearity, suggesting that while 'Systems, structures and policy' and 'Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt' remain fundamental causes of poverty, they also impact on other dimensions (such as 'Lack of control over choices' and 'Damaged health and well-being') which are best described as parallel, rather than sequential. An alternative model was suggested based on concentric circles radiating out from 'Disempowering systems, structures and policies' and towards individual responses. This alternative model grappled with the interconnections running in both directions between dimensions.

The purpose of the model was to visualise the links. Three important conclusions came out of the model showing some ideas of what matters in understanding poverty.

- Co-researchers put both 'Disempowering systems, structures and policies' and 'Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt' as fundamental causes of all that then followed. 'Stigma, blame and judgement' were discussed as shaping other consequences, whereby stigma is created by systems and structures and then leads to wider negative consequences.

Figure 2: Representing relationships between dimensions

- The dimensions of poverty formed a web. The word ‘web’ came up repeatedly within the underlying peer group discussions. The language of webs highlights both the interconnections and a sense of feeling overloaded to the point of being ensnared and unable to escape.
- Individual action was considered important. But individual action had to be seen as operating within limited opportunities and constraints. Community support, from families or charities, were also seen as important to moderate the impact of poverty. Individuals do have agency within their lives; but this does not mean that they have control.

In the final section, we draw on these implications in the key messages set out below.

6. Background to the research

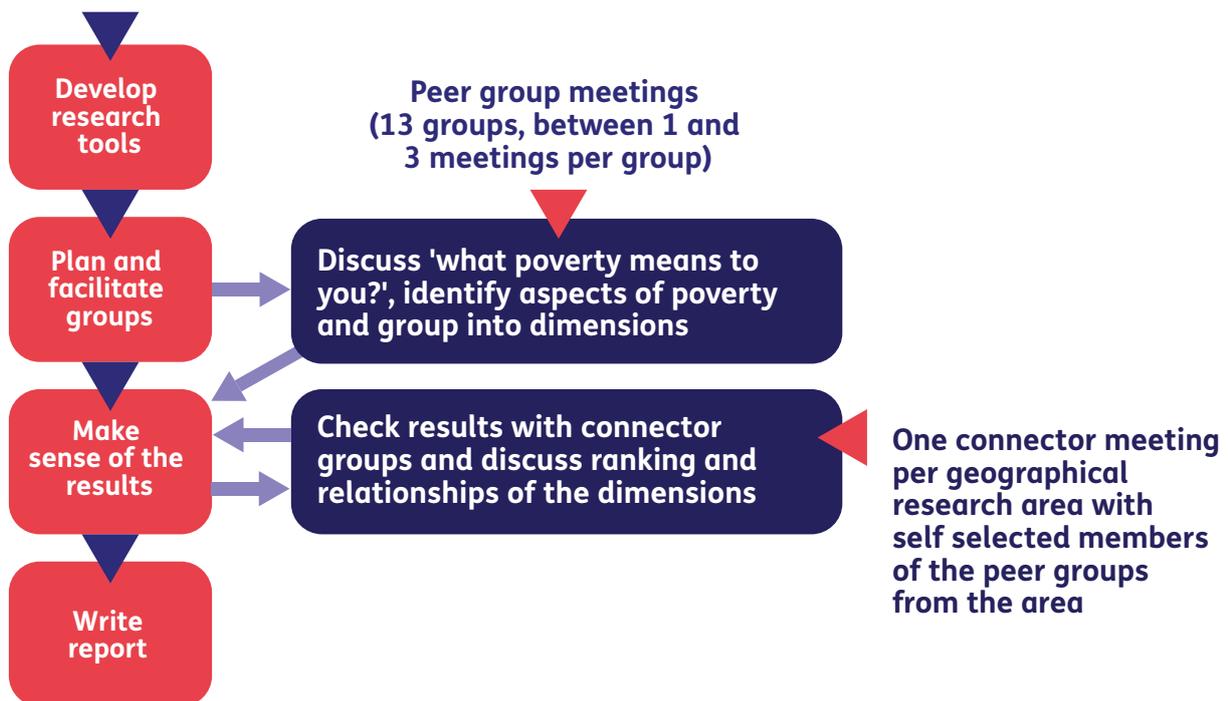
The research process

This research is part of a global study which has taken place in Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, and the United States as well as here in the UK. Each country had a research team undertaking their own study in parallel with the five other countries. Members of the UK research team have attended events with representatives from each of the national teams and an international steering team to merge the findings and produce the global study¹³ (see Annex 4). All of these studies were designed to be genuinely participatory by involving those with lived experience of poverty alongside practitioners, academics and others. By genuine participation, we mean more than consulting people with lived experience of poverty. We mean that those with lived experience of poverty were involved in leading and implementing the research throughout, from design and data collection to write-up and dissemination. In the research, conscious efforts were made to overcome power imbalances between people. Together, we have tried to learn from each other’s experience and expertise. In the UK our research has been managed by ATD Fourth World UK.¹⁴ We have benefited from suggested tools and discussion with colleagues from International Movement ATD Fourth World¹⁵ and the University of Oxford.

Since the aim of this research has been to place those with lived experience of poverty at the centre, a careful process was developed to ensure that voices often marginalised within society were not marginalised within the research. There were a number of steps on that research journey, summarised in the drawing below:

Figure 3: The research journey

Set up national research team of co-researchers and operations team



The first step was to set up the group of co-researchers. This began in earnest in September 2016. The group was brought together by ATD Fourth World UK, using its own networks and also contacting others to help identify people with the skills and willingness to participate. Half of the co-researchers had lived experience of poverty: three had been involved with ATD Fourth World UK while two others had been involved with Poverty Truth Commissions but not previously with ATD Fourth World UK. These choices were made because it was felt that, within the confines of the research study, it was necessary that co-researchers had some experience of similar processes. It was felt important to include but also go beyond ATD Fourth World UK's existing networks to help ensure openness to new perspectives. The remaining five co-researchers had experience of poverty through their work in journalism, academia, or statutory and voluntary services. Again some, but not all, had a knowledge of ATD Fourth World UK before the study began. The distinctions between co-researchers with lived experience of poverty and those with experience from their work were important to balancing different forms of knowledge. However, over time we realised that people's experience cannot be divided neatly into lived or professional experience and that both groups drew on their own complex mix of knowledge and experience.

The co-researchers were actively involved throughout, supported by the operations team from ATD Fourth World UK who were responsible for the day-to-day work, planning and organising meetings and note and minute taking. In planning the research study, conscious steps were taken to overcome barriers to participation. Two members of the operations team had the role of supporting co-researchers to engage with the study. They kept in touch with co-researchers outside the regular meetings to obtain feedback on how things were going and identify necessary improvements. It has been noted that the combination of long meetings and tight travel schedules can undermine effective participatory working.¹⁶ Accordingly, we scheduled time for social activities involving the co-researchers such as eating together and residential meetings in order to help build the relationships of trust necessary to break down barriers.

The co-researchers and the operations team worked together to understand the research issues and how to address them. This involved thinking through research ethics¹⁷, developing ground rules for group work and discussing and testing methods. Potential partner organisations were identified and consideration was given to suitable locations and venues for the group meetings which formed the heart of the research. This planning phase took place through much of 2017. It laid the foundations of the research and created the approaches and methods for the study. The groups participating in the research were named 'peer groups' as they were selected to have a form of knowledge in common, gained either through life in a disadvantaged area or through work related to people living in poverty. Possible participants for the peer groups were often identified by members of local community groups contacted through the research. Some participants were already known to ATD Fourth World UK but as with the co-researchers, deliberate efforts were made to make new contacts to break out of ATD Fourth World UK's existing network. Potential peer group participants were invited to be involved in the groups held in the Central Belt of Scotland, the South of England and Northern England in spring and summer 2018. Numbers of participants are in the table and fuller details of the peer groups are provided in Annex 1. For reasons of anonymity, however, the precise location and membership of the groups are withheld. In

each regional location where research took place, there were four groups: two groups with lived experience of poverty, one of practitioners with day-to-day experience of poverty through their work (such as teachers, social workers or housing providers), and one group of policy makers and opinion-formers (such as journalists, academics or policy makers). A thirteenth group consisting of members of the general public was also created and its data was used to see if an alternative pattern of responses emerged from this differently selected group¹⁸. While the distinctions between the backgrounds of the group participants served the research purpose, the reality was more complex. As we found within the co-researcher group, some people in the practitioner and opinion-former groups had personal experience of poverty and vice versa.

Table 1: Numbers of participants in the peer groups and the connectors groups

Area	Peer Group	Women	Men	Total
Central Belt of Scotland	Professional/practitioners	4	3	7
	Opinion formers/ decision makers	2	6	8
	Lived experience of poverty group 1	4	2	6
	Lived experience of poverty group 2	3	1	4
	Connector meeting	4	3	7
North of England	Professional/practitioners	3	2	5
	Opinion formers/ decision makers	2	5	7
	Lived experience of poverty group 1	6	2	8
	Lived experience of poverty group 2	5	1	6
	Connector meeting	6	5	11
South of England	Professional/practitioners	4	3	7
	Opinion formers/ decision makers	3	5	8
	Lived experience of poverty group 1	4	5	9
	Lived experience of poverty group 2	5	3	8
	Connector meeting	1	3	4
General public		3	4	7
Total	All	48	42	90
	<i>Not including general public</i>	45	38	83

Each peer group with lived experience of poverty met three times. Other groups met either once or twice, depending on need and the feasibility of getting people together. A typical plan for these meetings is in Annex 2 which covers the key activities. These meetings, led by co-researchers and the operations team, allowed time for participants to get to know each other, to hear about the purpose and process of the research and to learn how the information from the discussions would be used. Care was taken to involve all participants whether the meetings involved small group work or discussion among the group as a whole. The meetings were then used to develop a sense of what the aspects were that made up poverty (i.e. individual parts which would add up to a bigger whole). The discussion was started by asking participants to draw a body map (see figure 4

keeping the exact words from the original research participants was important and that our own framing should not be imposed on the data. After two days of intense and challenging discussion through the approach developed by ATD Fourth World known as the Merging of Knowledge, the aspects from the peer groups were grouped into new dimensions. The results were then checked to see if the general public group²⁰ suggested any missing dimensions. By the end of the residential meeting a framework of dimensions was agreed on with names and short statements describing each dimension. There remained areas where more work was required, such as some of the wording of the statements describing each dimension. Despite the outstanding points to resolve and refine, the co-researchers had developed a framework to task the operations team to write up as a short first draft.

The next step was to present the first draft to representatives from the peer groups, a group we called the connectors.²¹ Meetings were held in Autumn 2018 in each of the geographic regions. The draft findings were presented and participants asked for their response.²² This stage was also used to ask the connectors to reflect on which dimension was most important and think about some of the relationships between them. The results of these meetings were fed back to the co-researchers who reflected on whether changes should be made to the first draft results. Further work to develop the written report and draw out key messages then took place in late 2018 and early 2019, with a residential meeting held in April 2019 to agree on final changes. This work involved small writing teams of co-researchers and members of the operations team whose work was then shared with the whole group. This report is the product of that process and reflects changes and re-framings made to a number of the dimensions following discussions and simplifications suggested during the connectors' meetings.

Limitations of the research

As with any research, our approach will have affected the results and so here we discuss potential limitations before moving on to discuss our findings.

The idea for the research was to look in detail at the qualitative experience of poverty. It was not to collect a statistically representative image as surveys typically do. We ran groups in England and Scotland but none in Wales nor in Northern Ireland. Most of our groups took place in urban areas. While that reflects the largely urban UK population, there may be important issues in rural areas (such as transport difficulties) that this research does not identify. The groups consisted of adults of working age. This was a conscious decision in order to manage the complexity of the study and to align it with the International Movement ATD Fourth World and University of Oxford global study.²³ Participatory work with children and older people to understand their experience of poverty is important but it was not our aim here. Our method could be adapted to reach these groups at a later date.

It is an inherent tension in our research that, while it was essential to include people in poverty in the process, we did not have an initial definition of poverty to guide selection, since to select on that basis would have prejudged the answer to our research question about what constitutes poverty in all of its forms. Our solution was to seek a diversity of people likely to be experiencing serious disadvantage, either living in disadvantaged areas or who were in contact with anti-poverty advocacy and support organisations. Conscious efforts were made to reach beyond ATD Fourth World UK's existing networks and to form links with new people and groups who could contribute to this research. There was little value in speaking with people who simply reiterated what we thought we already knew. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that there is some selection bias in the process, as only people who were interested and volunteered to take part could be included. This is an inevitable challenge which all research faces to a greater or lesser degree.

As part of our research process, participants were asked to fill in a short form recording their age, ethnicity and gender and this showed a good diversity in the sample: it was equally balanced between men and women and contained a range of backgrounds from different minority and majority ethnic groups.²⁴ It also included some research participants who were homeless and others subject to immigration control. Most of our participants who lived in poverty were not in employment. Only six out of the 38 participants in the lived experience peer groups indicated that they had been 'In some form of paid work' in the week before the peer group. This limits our ability to discuss concerns over poverty among those in low paid or insecure work. This problem is a limitation for research generally as those in insecure work or working multiple jobs have the least time to spare; and participation in research is time consuming. It is also worth noting that our questions were about the experience of poverty, not about how people seek work or the barriers they face in doing so.

Finally, the primary data for the study came from the peer group discussions. The peer group dimensions were merged by the co-researchers and aspects used as part of the process of building the new dimensions. Our process of building up dimensions imposes two conditions. First, the aspects are sometimes de-contextualized from the individual story: we do not know the full meaning invested by individuals in specific terms. Second, we were interested in individual perspectives and we did not impose a test as to whether such perspectives were 'right', 'wrong' or 'consistent' by some other yardstick.²⁵ The consequence of this is that we have breadth but not depth in the data. The individual aspects are revealing of the individual experience of poverty; but the real power of the research is the accumulated aspects and the patterns these build through the dimensions.

7. Messages from the research

This research is part of the first global qualitative analysis of poverty in all its forms. The global report was published by the International Movement ATD Fourth World.²⁶ Discussion with our colleagues elsewhere in the world has taught us that, while the experience of people in poverty is different in each country, there are common features. These include a lack of choice and being subjected to stigma and judgement. Here we draw out key messages relevant for UK policy debate and research on poverty. These messages are our reflections on the research findings about why and how these matter. We did not set out to evaluate specific policy choices; but the emphasis that so many research participants placed on disempowering systems, structures and policies highlights how important change is at that level. The messages below are steps for action towards a better societal response to poverty.

Message 1: It is essential that people with lived experience participate in tackling poverty. This requires time, careful planning and commitment

This research recognises that the lived reality of poverty is expert knowledge. This experience is made more powerful when combined with knowledge from other, professional, sources. It is unjust to exclude those most affected by poverty from having a voice in ending it. Genuine participation requires time, careful planning and commitment. It is important because, through participation, people can be involved in decisions made about them and also because it extends knowledge of the implications of living in poverty. Such knowledge is vital to meeting the challenge of developing more effective systems and structures and ending poverty and inequality.

The stigma, blame and judgement inflicted on people living in poverty were strongly emphasised by participants. While these are recognised within debates about poverty they are seldom given this degree of prominence. People in poverty are not passive victims and this research highlights their willingness to participate and share knowledge with regards to poverty. Ignoring these contributions fuels negative stereotypes.

Achieving genuine participation means treating everyone involved with equal respect. It means striving to work together on an equal footing and valuing the expertise gained through lived experience of poverty as much as expertise from other perspectives. This requires active engagement from the start as well as sufficient time and consideration of possible power imbalances which may prevent involvement. The positive news is that there is a growing number of examples of good practice where conscious efforts are being made to involve people in poverty²⁷, such as the Poverty Truth Commissions²⁸ and Government policy development (for example the Scottish Government's Fairer Scotland Action Plan²⁹). We would welcome the opportunity to discuss with interested parties how our experience and approach can contribute to improving participation in policy and research.

Message 2: There is a need for better indicators of poverty that emphasise and capture the human experience of poverty.

Understanding poverty in all its forms in the UK requires a focus on income and on the wider implications of living without financial security. Our results do not automatically create a clear set of measures.³⁰ The dimensions we have identified should open the discussions about other forms of poverty. Damaged health, stigma and judgement and a lack of control came out strongly in this research.

Our research emphasizes additional issues of lack of control and of the experience of stigma, blame and judgement. Lived realities are often best represented through human voices, as is shown in the detail of this report. However, policy debates often make use of statistics, such as the official Households Below Average Incomes series³¹, that use money as the central indicator. Quantitative monetary indicators are important to inform and drive public policy; however, our results suggest that understanding poverty in all its forms requires approaches that go beyond income.

There are already some approaches which consider poverty beyond income. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are used widely across the UK³² to identify which areas are most disadvantaged. They draw on administrative indicators of income, employment, education, health and other domains. The recent Social Metrics Commission has also suggested a new approach based around an income indicator and wider lived experience indicators, such as health, education and skills, work, social participation, material deprivation, family life, and access to services³³. We are eager to discuss further how this study might feed into the identification of good indicators of lived experience of poverty.

Message 3: Inadequate financial resources are a cause of poverty that take away control and can shorten lives

The dimensions identified include financial resources as a central element. A lack of money was directly linked by many participants to the experience of poor health. Poverty was referred to as destroying lives, worsening mental and physical health and ultimately, in many cases, leading to early death. These stark impacts reinforce the importance of giving greater policy attention to tackling this injustice. Participants frequently raised issues of growing inequality and of austerity which suggest a problem which is getting worse not better. Hearing voices of experience give context to statistics and shows how poverty impacts health and shortens lives. Powerful descriptions of lived experience can then build wider public support for change. Poverty can shorten people's lives and must be given greater policy attention.

Message 4: The impact of stigma and negative judgement is a particularly painful part of poverty.

One of the most powerful findings from the research was the importance which participants put on stigma, blame and judgement. This dimension was identified by participants as important in making life intolerable and as the issue that should be tackled first. Stigma, blame and judgement result from the ways in which people in poverty are treated in society: by the public, in the media and by policy. This message is important for all those whose actions help frame perceptions about poverty. It is perhaps particularly important for leaders, such as politicians and policy makers, to bear in mind the impact of stigma, blame and judgement as they describe the experience, causes or solutions to poverty. As noted elsewhere, negative judgement negates the positive contributions people in poverty make.

Stigma, blame and judgement is not just about being made to feel worthless; it can also result in disenfranchisement if people alter their behaviour to avoid situations. Some, for example may exclude themselves to minimise shame. Stigma can therefore exacerbate poverty by making it harder for people to seek help. It is notable that many participants who have lived in poverty and had experience of social services (often in relation to family interventions) reported feeling blamed and judged for circumstances they felt resulted from poverty. To improve and ‘shame-proof’ public policy, it is crucial to work hard to reduce stigma. Shame-proofing public policy requires listening carefully to people living in poverty about their experience of services.

It is also important for journalists to consider how they portray poverty in the UK. Guidance³⁴ has been produced by the National Union of Journalists and people with lived experience, which provides an approach to covering stories about poverty in a positive, respectful, way.

Message 5: Participants agreed that services should be enabling and supportive; but some services are experienced as controlling and oppressive.

It makes for deeply uncomfortable reading that, despite the good intentions of services to improve the lives of those experiencing difficulty, this is often not how they are experienced. Benefit payments and social work came in for most discussion. Group participants recognised the importance of both areas of work and the good intentions of many who work in these public services (whether they are provided by public servants or through charities). Others, however, reported being denied support, experiencing inappropriate conditionality, or decisions which felt like negative moral judgements. As a specific example in asylum policy, limiting access to state support and being denied permission to work were seen as ways that poverty was used as a policy tool. The stigma and the removal of people’s choices are a key part of what makes poverty unacceptable and overwhelming.

A fundamental implication of this message relates to how services operate. It shows that services need to be open to working with people living in poverty rather than trying to discipline them through controlling access to services and support. Efforts need to be made to build trust between the people who are using and providing services to ensure that both are working towards a goal of reducing poverty and maximising well-being.

Message 6: The skills and contributions made to society by people in poverty often go unrecognised

Even though poverty creates huge barriers, participants emphasised the skills and unrecognised contributions made by people in poverty to their families and communities and to overcoming poverty. But the lack of recognition of these wider contributions, for example through volunteer work, reinforces negative stereotypes of people in poverty. Such stereotypes label individuals and are so powerful that people in poverty may internalise such views and feelings. While participants were clear that people in poverty are not passive to the situation they found themselves in, the impact of poverty can be so oppressive that people experiencing poverty may devalue and under-estimate their skills, experiences and contributions as they may lack self-worth and feel ashamed, judged or stigmatised.

The unrecognised contribution of people in poverty is a key message for those, such as journalists, who shape understandings of what poverty is. Public debates about poverty should go beyond tired stereotypes of people in poverty as passive recipients of state support and move towards recognition of the contribution people in poverty make to improve their own, their families' and their communities' situations. This is an important way to combat the stigma discussed in Message 4.

Message 7: Individual resilience is no substitute for better systems, structures and policies

Individual resilience, the idea that some people can cope despite difficult circumstances, came in for much discussion during the research study. The necessity to adapt to poverty and find ways of coping can be interpreted as 'resilience'; but this can be a problematic notion if used to justify hardship and suffering. Calling on people in poverty to be resilient is not a solution to poverty. Indeed, judging some people as more or less 'resilient' adds to stereotypes and stigma. This message is relevant to those designing policies and to those working in services aiming to reach people in poverty. Better systems, structures and policies are needed to make change so that people have real choices.

A final word

This report reflects back on nearly three years of participative work with a group of people all concerned with understanding what poverty means in the UK today and who all share a commitment to ending it. The research has involved ninety people from around the UK as members of peer groups and ten co-researchers. We have come together to share our thoughts and experiences and worked to synthesise our different views. It has been arduous, complex and extremely rewarding. We have agreed that poverty is a problem that is deeply rooted in our institutions; this is reflected in widely held social attitudes that undermine and marginalise people living in poverty. As well as being an ancient problem, poverty has a modern face in an era of growing inequalities and social divisions. Our research has shown that poverty in the United Kingdom today is still experienced as a lack of material resources and opportunities and that it is also experienced as a stigmatising label that blights lives. Poverty is an affront to human dignity that excludes and punishes people and makes them ill. This study reinforces that people with lived experience of poverty should not be defined by their lack of privilege; and that they are capable, purposeful, imaginative and well able to provide a sophisticated analysis of how poverty comes about and is maintained. Their insights have been supported and given depth by others in the study who have offered professional and research-based knowledge into how poverty and marginalisation affect the life chances of people.

We hope that this study and our messages will contribute to understanding poverty in all its forms in the UK. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, we hope that our messages will feed into international efforts to understand how material inequalities undermine well-being and personal and social development. We hope these messages will lead to further studies on the effects of poverty and that our way of working — putting the voices of people with experience of poverty front and centre — will become the norm in research rather than the exception. We have developed important experience in co-production — in research design, data collection and analysis — and are committed to sharing what we have learned. In addition, our messages have lessons for policy makers, planners, service providers, commissioners and funders. We hope that they will be considered carefully and taken to heart.

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Endnotes

1. Participants were asked to complete a form requesting information on their gender, ethnicity, employment status, and so on. Summary information about each group is in Annex 1.
2. <https://atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/understanding-poverty/>
3. For example: H. Barnard, 'UK Poverty 2018: A comprehensive analysis of poverty trends and figures', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation Analysis Unit*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2018> (accessed on 26 July 2019); J. Cribb, A. Keiller, and T. Waters, 'Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2018', *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13075> (accessed on 26 July 2019); and Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights', United Nations Human Rights Council, Forty-first session, 24 June-12 July 2019.
4. For example: Comptroller and Auditor General, 'Rolling out Universal Credit', *UK National Audit Office*, 15 June 2018, <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Rolling-out-Universal-Credit.pdf>, (accessed on 26 July 2019); House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 'Universal Credit: managed migration,' *Parliament*, Twentieth Report of Session 2017-19, HC 1762, 21 November 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1762/1762.pdf> (accessed on 28 July 2019); and Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019.
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10. Office for National Statistics, 'Sustainable Development Goals', *Office for National Statistics*, 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/sustainabledevelopmentgoals> (accessed 27 July 2019).
11. The recent 'Dole Animators' project is a notable research example in the UK: <https://doleanimators.org.uk/the-research/and-more-research> (accessed 27 July 2019). See also R. Patrick, 'Unsettling the Anti-Welfare Commonsense: The Potential in Participatory Research with People Living in Poverty', *Journal of Social Policy* 1, 21 May 2019, pp. 1-20. Patrick (2019). Previously, participatory approaches to research into poverty were discussed by F. Bennett with M. Roberts in 'From input to influence: Participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, York, 2004.
12. Eleven participants completed the exercise in the North of England, six in the Central Belt of Scotland and four in the South of England. The connector groups included both those with lived experience of poverty and those with experience from their work. Stigma and blame corresponds to 'Stigma, blame and judgement'; health and well-being to 'Damaged health and well-being'; lack of control to 'Lack of control over choices'; finances to 'Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt'; coping to 'Unrecognised struggles, skills and contributions'; and systems to 'Disempowering systems, structures and policies'.
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17. The UK study took place under the auspices of ATD Fourth World UK. The UK project was also part of, and supported by, a wider study, which was a collaboration between the International Movement ATD World and the University of Oxford. The ethics approach of the whole international study was approved by the University of Oxford's ethics committee; the UK study also operated within these parameters.
18. It was initially planned to carry out more of these general public groups; however, for reasons of feasibility and cost we decided to run only one. The dimensions and aspects generated by the general public were not incorporated in the analysis except as a check brought in after a merging knowledge process had been completed.
19. Sometimes called photo elicitation.
20. As noted above, we ran one 'general public group' but decided not to include its dimensions in the merging knowledge process. Instead these dimensions were used at the end of the process to check what might be missing.
21. The idea here is that these research peer group participants were able to connect earlier discussions with later findings, and so check, improve and validate these conclusions. However, connectors were asked to give their own view rather than try to represent their peer group.
22. To provide space for open-ended feedback, questions were asked along the lines of what was most 'surprising' or 'interesting', rather than 'do you agree'. Results were then fed back to co-researchers who had the opportunity to adjust the dimensions.
23. The International Movement ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford, 2019.
24. A more detailed breakdown of all this data is included as Annex 1.
25. For example, in one peer group it was suggested that intergenerational poverty was a very serious problem. While this is a common view, academic evidence points out that while growing up poor increases the chances of being poor later, people and families move in and out of poverty over time, rather than being stuck in a fixed position over the whole of a lifetime or over generations. (e.g. intergenerational poverty is discussed by S. Jenkins and T. Siedler in 'The intergenerational transmission of poverty in industrialized countries', *Discussion Papers 693*, DIW Berlin, German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin, May 2007. See also a discussion of patterns of poverty over individual lifetimes in T. Shildrick et al, 'The low-pay, no-pay cycle: Understanding recurrent poverty', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, November 2010, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/unemployment-pay-poverty-full.pdf> (accessed 27 July 2019).
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